

# *The Research on the Impact of Fake News about Russia-Ukraine War upon Users*

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**Abstract:** In recent years, due to the constant changes in the international situation, fake news has experienced a increasing emerging, making it more difficult for users to distinguish between the truth. This article intends to conduct a research based on the recent fake news case of the Russia-Ukraine war, to focus on how the fake news impact on the mass public. The results of this research indicated that majority of the users would believe the message that the news conveyed, generated the negative attitudes of the audience, and further arouse users to criticize the “guilty party” that the news pointed out. However, throughout the research, this paper found out that there are certain number of users would question the realness of news, which this paper sees as a good phenomenon for it represents the awakening of civic consciousness. This paper calls for future experiments to start with how to improve the public's judgment, so as to reduce the bad influence of fake news on the public.

**Keywords:** fake news, agenda setting, media platform

## **1. Introduction**

'Fake news' became the word of the year in 2017 for both the American Dialect Society and Collins Dictionary. The former defines fake news as "false information or falsehoods presented as real news" or "actual news that is claimed to be untrue," while the latter defines fake news as "false and often sensational information disseminated under the guise of news reporting." As for the typology of fake news, previous studies have operationalized fake news: satire, parody, fabrication, manipulation, propaganda, and advertising [1]. In this paper, we define the concept of fake news as refers to information that is disseminated with the characteristics of news appearance, but the content is inaccurate.

With the development of the Internet, people rely more and more on the Internet for information. Because of this, along with the emergence of new media, there is also an overwhelming amount of

fake news, which leads people to see more and more fake news and harvest more and more fake information. The danger of this fake news that plays with the public, confuses the public, and creates panic cannot be underestimated. If fake news continues to proliferate for a long time, the authority of the media will also be inertially questioned, and the credibility of the media will be greatly reduced, which will also lead to a continuous decline in the media literacy of the audience and a surge in negative social energy. In the new media social context constructed by the Internet, this kind of fake news will certainly be rectified. However, the "monitoring" of fake news is easy, the "control" is difficult, and the "removal" is a long way to go, which requires audiences to improve their ability to identify fake news and learn how to deal with it.

The research in this paper is conducted in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022, which in fact had its beginnings. In the early spring of 2014, the Crimean crisis set the stage for the current war. On September 5, 2014, the two sides signed the Minsk Protocol, negotiated by Germany and Russia, as a basis for a temporary state of peace between them. Since then, however, violations of the protocol's requirements by the warring parties have never really stopped. In December 2021, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement asking the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization to provide legal guarantees to rule out further NATO expansion. From January 10 to 13, 2022, Russia again held dialogue and communication with the United States and NATO, respectively, but with no tangible results.

On February 15, 2022, Russia's Defense Ministry announced a high-profile withdrawal of some of its ground troops deployed along the border with Ukraine. Two days later, however, the situation in eastern Ukraine deteriorated, with the government and local civilian forces accusing each other of shelling along the contact line. On the evening of February 21, the Russian President signed a decree recognizing Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine.

On 24 February 2022, Ukrainian authorities closed the country's airspace and President Zelenskiy declared that the entire territory of Ukraine would be in a state of war; Russian forces then began shelling military command centers and airports in eastern Ukraine and elsewhere. On the same day, Ukraine announced it was severing diplomatic ties with Russia. On March 2, Ukraine closed its consulate general in St. Petersburg, Russia. Russia launched an air strike on the Yavorovsky training ground in the Lviv region in the early morning of June 13. On May 3rd Russian forces destroyed an Arsenal of US-European aid containing missiles and drones. The war continues to this day.

Since the deterioration of the situation between Russia and Ukraine, the West has been fabricating and disseminating false news, which has contributed to the volatility of the international situation. The U.S. disinformation has intensified as the situation has become tense, claiming that "the Russian side has requested military assistance from China". The Chinese spokesman said that it is unprofessional, unethical, and irresponsible for the U.S. side to create and spread false news from time to time! On April 20, Deputy Secretary of State Sherman expressed U.S. concerns about "China's support for Russia's aggression against Ukraine," claiming that the Chinese side had amplified false news about NATO and the Russo-Ukrainian war.

This study collects and analyzes data on the fake news story "Russia asks China for military assistance" and tries to compare the difference of audience's reaction between Weibo and Twitter and analyze the reasons for this difference.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Ideology of the Media Platform**

Ideology as a vital link between the state, society, and individuals, and for the nation's governing class to assume ideological leadership, understanding ideological discourse is a must [2]. And the media is often the mouthpiece of political parties and classes

The Frankfurt School based on the controlling, power, design, and manipulation of mass media regarded the media as the ideology itself to maintain state rule [3]. The Frankfurt School scholar Habermas explained in his theory of technological ideology that the development of society is ruled by the implicit ideology of technological control and permeates the public consciousness, and that this reliance on the logic of technological progress becomes a significant method of political domination and social control.

In a study of Facebook discussion boards, 10 scholars, including University of Michigan scholars Eytan Baksh and Solomon Mess-ig, found that each company has to develop its own algorithm, and depending on the algorithm, the content seen by the conservative viewpoint is reduced by about 5% compared to the content shared by his friends, and the speech of the liberal is reduced by 8%. Such differences in access to users' views due to different algorithms are known as the "ideological information cocoon" of self-publishing [4].

In fact, the self-media itself has ideological attributes and has touched on major issues such as national ideological security, so it is important to actively address the threat posed by the self-media to national ideological security from the technical level, academic research level, and practical level [5].

### **2.2. Factors Influencing the Audience's Reaction to Fake News**

By reading the previous literature, the factors that influence the different reactions of audiences to fake news are as follows: first, factors such as education, age and total media consumption are closely related to it. Secondly, ideology is also very important factor, when the content in the news is consistent with the ideology perceived by the audience, the audience is more inclined to believe this type of news [6]. Then, the low media literacy of citizens is also an influencing factor. The public's news and media literacy are broadly defined as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and evaluate information". Arguably, "evaluation" skills influence whether citizens believe the news or not, that is, whether they can tell whether it is true or fake because those with limited assessment skills "cannot distinguish between outdated, biased or exploited sources" [7]. With low public media literacy, fake news spreads disinformation rapidly in today's media ecosystem, especially on social media platforms. These vast sources of information lead individuals to rely heavily on heuristics and social cues to determine the credibility of information and form their own beliefs, which are extremely difficult to correct or change and are one of the key factors influencing audiences' reactions to fake news [8]. Furthermore, viewers are more likely to accept information that seems to fit their original logical description, or that comes from sources they consider "credible." In this case, the authority of the source has a negative effect on the acceptance of different viewpoints in the news, while the influence of the source has a positive effect. Moreover, both the readability of the information and the quality of the argumentation had a positive impact on the credence of the rebuttal. To put it simply, people with low cognitive ability rely more on the credibility of the source and the quality of the argument when accepting refutations, while people with excellent abilities in this field will refer more to the readability of the information [9]. The confirmation bias theory is used to show that people are more inclined to believe the fake news that confirms their previous beliefs or assumptions and will spread this type of fake news to their friends

and relatives. The user's history and social communication records, such as the topics they have followed and posts they have published, will provide a lot of information about the user's preference for fake news, which is likely to promote the development of fake news detection [10].

Overall, there are abundant theories about fake news in academic circles, and the existing literature provides the basis for our research. However, there are many unsatisfactory aspects of previous studies. For example, some studies are only limited to a certain region, and cannot directly infer that the theory can be applied in other regions, while some studies are limited to elite groups with higher education, and the results of such studies are also greatly biased. In addition, previous studies mostly focused on fake news related to the presidential election or conducted general studies on some topics such as politics and economy, and there were not many studies focused on fake news related to the Russia-Ukraine war, which is a new use and development of fake news in the latest international war and is a supplement and extension of the study of fake news, so it has important research significance. This paper decided to carry out new research. Accordingly, based on the previous related study, we next try to compare the difference of audience's reaction between Weibo and Twitter, and analyze the reasons for this difference.

### 3. Methodology

This research will be using descriptive method to collect data. The data are specialized from the comments under the specific news report from Twitter and Weibo. The news on Twitter reads as follows: "according to the Financial Times, US officials stated that Russia has requested military aid from China since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine in the form of military equipment and other assistance." While news coverage on Weibo as "ambassador to the United States Qin Gang published an op-ed in the Washington Post titled 'Our Position on Ukraine'." What noteworthy is that the news has proven to be untrue by the officials, which made the news itself a fake news. In order to study the diversity of the public's reaction, this paper use the same news that has been published on two different social platform, which the content conveys the same message. However, due to the different political and economy system, resulting the two social platform serves different ideology, which further impacted the ways that how this news portrays. In this research, the news that has been collected from Weibo platform is tends to be a clarification, whereas the news that has been posted on Twitter is a straight news. It is undeniable that this research remains certain defect by this point, but it doesn't influence the focus of this research which is the response from the audience instead of the news content.

To study the influence that fake news has brought to its audience, this research uses the method of analyzing the comment (from textual characteristics and emotional characteristics) below the fake news. The social platforms that this research chose are Weibo (mainly used by Chinese users) and the other is Twitter (mainly used by English users). The independent variable of this research is the news itself, and the dependent variables are the user's response from both textual and emotional aspect. The news that has posted on Twitter has around 187 comments, whereas the news that posted on Weibo has 204 comments. In terms of data collection, this research tends to manually collect data from those two platforms.

From textual aspects, this research tends to work from actual content, wording, emoji, picture, punctuation used to analysis how user has been affected. The study of wording is to find the user's direct response through words. The study of emoji, picture, and punctuations because that some people didn't leave a comment and instead they use emoji or picture to show their views. And lastly, this research will overall read each comment and categorize these comments as highly aggressive, not aggressive, neutral, question the realness, bringing other questions.

From emotional aspects, this research tends to work from the commentator's attitude and their orientations to analysis how user has been affected. The study of attitude is actually from the way

that the comment has been written. For instance, the rational comment would be “xxx do not need help”, irony comment would be “there will be no more xxx made goods”, the irrational comment would be “let’s sanctions xx”, and the critical ones would be someone who stand in a neutral point of view to criticize the whole events, the questionable comment would be like question the realness of this news, and the others just bring the unrelated response.

#### 4. Results

Based on the data collected, we can draw the following results. Firstly, the sentiment analysis of the comments shows that the most irrational attitudes are found in the comments on Twitter, accounting for more than 20%. The proportion of other perspectives is relatively even, with the ratio fluctuating around 15%. On the other hand, sarcastic attitudes were the most prevalent in comments on Weibo, accounting for more than 35%. Besides, rational attitudes were also more prominent in words, accounting for nearly 30%. Other perspectives of attitudes were unevenly represented, but all fluctuated around 10%.

Comments on Twitter and Weibo also differ in terms of user orientation. Twitter has the most critical and judgmental orientation, with a share and over half, suggesting that the Twitter audience is indeed being misguided by public opinion. Most comments on Twitter were critical of China, accounting for more than 20% of the total. However, there are 20% users on Twitter has questioned the realness of the news and expressed criticism towards the news publisher. And Weibo had the most critical orientations, mainly against the US, with a share of around 70%. However, about 10 percent of netizens were also neutral about the authenticity of the news. At the same time, a few were also skeptical about the Chinese government.

In terms of the textual aspect, the majority of Twitter and Weibo comments use civilized language, most of the comments on Twitter and Weibo do not use emoticons and images, and more than half of the comments use non-emotional punctuation, which is influenced by the commentators' commenting habits and platform characteristics. However, in general, most commentators are more rational than emotional in their comments.

#### 5. Discussion

The result that this research found suggested that the particular fake news would generate the negative impact on the attitudes of the audience. The majority of the users including both Weibo users and Twitter users would believe the message that the news conveyed, and further influenced the attitude of the audience for the majority of users criticize the “guilty party” that the news pointed out.

Different users' reactions to fake news on platforms are related to many factors. First of all, in terms of the user itself, at the demographic level, users have different attributes, such as age, education level, and social status, which lead to further understanding and discernment when they are confronted with fake news. The political background of users also varies from platform to platform. Weibo's users are mainly Chinese and usually trust the Chinese government more under the influence of the Chinese discourse. On the other hand, Twitter users are more diverse and more influenced by Western political and cultural backgrounds, making them more likely to believe in the discourse of Western power structures. Second, users' personal experiences influence their perceptions and judgments of fake news. For example, users who suffer from local attacks by the U.S. military are more likely to believe that news reports by the U.S. media are fake. In addition, users' news activity and previous exposure to fake news also affect their perception and judgment of fake news. The more information active the users are, and the more they have been exposed to fake news, the more likely they are to make a correct judgment about the facts of the fake news. Family

and social factors also influence not only that but users' reactions. These two are also influential factors that shape individual values and affect individuals' perceptions of news coverage, which will not be elaborated on here.

At the same time, the difference in users' reactions is also related to the orientation of news coverage. News on Weibo is oriented to clarify things and guide the audience's perception of the whole event. The use of words such as "prior knowledge," "acquiescence," and "connivance" shows the image of China as a victim of fake news. The tone of words such as 'impossible' also emphasizes China's firm political stance and uncompromising attitude, leading the audience to trust the Chinese government and make a correct value judgment on the truth of the incident. The fake news on Twitter is oriented to the description of the incident, intentionally trying to lead the audience to condemn the Chinese side's public opinion. The use of the phrase "An EU official "very reliable evidence" in the news attempt to convince the audience of the authenticity and reliability of the source. The fact that the report does not use critical discourse, but states facts is intended to disguise the objectivity of the incident and thus mislead the audience to make wrong factual judgments.

## 6. Conclusion

Current audiences' information literacy and media literacy have not improved enough to cope with the current new media age and are often deceived by fake news. Information literacy is a broad category, one important level of which is the ability to critically analyze and evaluate the content, form, and context of media messages as well as media institutions and agencies. The ability to recognize the truth or falsity of news is also an important critical reflective ability that encompasses one's daily use of common sense and reason. A great deal of dubious news is easily distinguished as true or false by common sense and reasoning. At the same time, in order to determine the authenticity and authority of the news, the public especially needs to know some professional conventions of journalism, which is a blind spot of knowledge for many audiences. Therefore, it is not surprising that many audiences still believe this fake news and spread them to their close friends and family.

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